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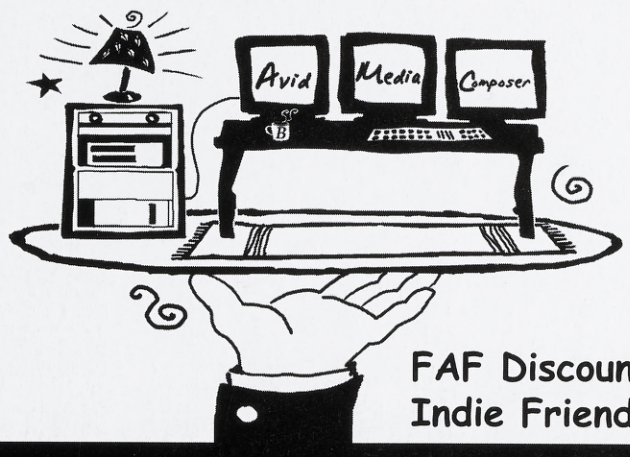

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Studio·B

in memoriam

On April 24, artist and filmmaker Sidney Peterson died of heart failure in Manhattan at the age of 94. Peterson was born in Oakland and received a degree from the University of California at Berkeley. He went on to live many lives: as a cub reporter for the *Monterey Herald* in the early 1920s, a painter and sculptor in France, a producer of documentaries in the 1950s (co-founding Orbit Films with Robert Gardner), director of educational television production at New York's MOMA, a novelist who lived in New Mexico and England, among other places, and a storyboard artist and scriptwriter at Disney. Out of all these lives, Peterson probably will be best remembered for putting San Francisco on the avant-garde filmmaking map.

Sidney Peterson in 1949 during the making of *The Petrified Dog*.
(Photo by Bill Heick, courtesy of Pacific Film Archive)

In the summer of 1946, Peterson and poet James Broughton made their first film, *The Potted Psalm*. Both men were enthralled with Surrealism, influenced by Freud and critical of contemporary films (which mostly glorified World War II and the U.S. role in it). In *Visionary Film*, historian P. Adams Sitney writes that *The Potted Psalm* "comes from the comic side of Surrealism with a debt to the great slapstick tradition of Max Sennett, Charlie Chaplin, Lloyd, Langdon and Laurel and Hardy." The 16mm short debuted as part of a series called Art in Cinema, which was an attempt by the San Francisco Museum of Art to expose the public to artistic films. (In fact, artists turned out in force to protest *The Potted Psalm*.) On the basis of the screening, Peterson landed a job teaching a filmmaking class for painters at the California School of Fine Arts, later renamed the San Francisco Art Institute.

During his brief tenure at the Art Institute, Peterson and his students formed Workshop 20, a group which created four films that would come to be regarded as avant-garde classics. Shot on minuscule budgets of around $150 each, these films all used San Francisco as their backdrop. The Art Institute students acted in and built sets for the films, and Peterson borrowed equipment and somehow was able to hire a cameraman, leaving himself free to lecture during shoots.

The Cage (1947) is the story of a crazed young man (and his doppelgänger) on a quest to retrieve his eyeball as it rolls around the streets of San Francisco. *The Petrified Dog* (1948), as described in Peterson's book *The Dark of the Screen*, features "chases within chases. A mother runs after a child. A man...seems to be pursuing himself. A woman who has been nibbling her lipstick through half of the film is pursued by a man"—and is a continuation of what Sitney has labeled the "picaresque" tradition in experimental film launched by Peterson and Broughton with *The Potted Psalm*. In 1949, the Workshop adapted Balzac's *Le Chef d'Oeuvre Inconnu* for the 21-minute work, *Mr. Frenhofer and the Minotaur*, which Sitney locates at "the crux of Peterson's genius." The final classic by Workshop 20, *The Lead Shoes* (1949), is generally praised as the best of Peterson's work, but when shown at La Biennale di Venezia, the audience threw chairs at the screen in disgust. That, however, is just the kind of response Peterson hoped to evoke. Early experimental filmmakers, he said, "managed to make film controversial. We did disturb people. Annoy them. Without that, not a ripple."

After leaving the Art Institute, Peterson went on to make several short documentaries and also wrote a number of animated films. He returned to his avant-garde roots in 1981 with *Man in a Bubble*, made with Marjorie Keller at the Chicago Art Institute. The Canyon Cinema catalogue describes the film as "a short documentary about personal acoustical space in an age of intolerable noise."

Sidney Peterson's comic sensibility, coupled with his technical playfulness, resulted in a body of work that filmmakers can revisit time and again for inspiration. It also serves as a reminder that San Francisco, in Peterson's words, "is better than most places for creative work."—*Shari Kizirian*

Nora Kasarda, Sidney Peterson's daughter, asks that those wishing to make a donation in his memory contribute to the Sidney Peterson Memorial Fund for Avant-Garde Film Preservation at the Pacific Film Archive. Please make checks payable to Pacific Film Archive and designate your gift for the Sidney Peterson Memorial Fund. Donations are tax-deductible to the full extent of the law, and donors will receive a letter of acknowledgment from PFA. Contributions should be sent to PFA Film Collection, Pacific Film Archive, 2625 Durant Avenue, #2250, Berkeley CA 94720-2250.